

Not on the Shelf

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My perspective on archives arises out of biographical circumstances. An ex-artist seeking reinvention as a scholar, I work in archives and I have one. So does every artist, and every scholar. It almost defines an artist to have an archive, or a private museum.

Before I entered school in art history, most of my artwork was destroyed in a legal disaster that may have been fortuitous. Much of my archive, however, remains. The bulkiest part of that is a video distribution business, a fitfully viable revenue-generating business. As an apprentice historian and a former artist with an archive, it is hard for me to speak of archives and what evades their grasp. This subject is twice bound up with me, and there is too much to say.

[ill: MARCEL DUCHAMP Boite en valise... “archive in a state of reproduction”]

My dissertation recounts a trajectory of politicized artists’ organizations from the formation of the Art Workers Coalition through Art & Language, Artists Meeting for Cultural Change, Collaborative Projects, Political Art Documentation (PADD) and Group Material. These groups spanned some 15 years from 1969 to 1984. Most of what there is in public archives and libraries in New York City is general. All of it seems vaguely pertinent, but it’s not really what I needed to construct an empirical history. Whether out of training, habit, convenience or sheer momentum, I worked almost entirely from textual sources. Given the skimpy material in most archives, my project would have made more sense as an oral history; that is to say, I should have created my own archive.

Some remarks on failure

In writing histories of the under-reported, and the commercially unsupported, I have come to realize the obvious: political opposition often entails failure and obscurity. I write of collective ventures that petered out, and artists who have been largely forgotten. Failure to achieve broad public notice or to sustain a group effort often results in amnesia, both personal and collective. Few art markets and institutions are interested in political work, so there is no history, only some stories and a feeling, the song of la bohème.

The history of creative effort may be described as in large measure the history of a continuous even preordained failure of hopeful people to change a world built by the word of those who own it, and structured according to principles of material self-interest.

A history that does not support saleable art, or a history long-ignored, is one that even its participants may turn away from. The parents’ unsold art, their failures to turn dreams, experiences and ideas into wealth, when it passes into the hands of the sons and daughters looks like trash to them.

This kind of sour attitude rather runs against the long-running American cultural romance of the margins. It sometimes seems as if marginality, that continent of universal suffering and insufficient means from which the beneficiaries of civilization are barred by their very comforts and institutional commitments, serves as a kind of 20th century Arcadia, a land where hobo shepherds write mystic runes and the police are all on strike...

[WALKER EVANS photo of hobo scrawl]

“Why bother?”

Always an important question to ask. Who cares what these artists’ organizations were about? They were fleeting and contingent, fun while they lasted, and merely aspects of an overall armature of support, perhaps the first limb of support for the artist in the city who was not well connected. As artists rise in stature, they drop their organizational memberships -- or acquire new ones, moving from bohemia to the academy. These groups are to art as scaffolds are to architecture.

The historian who understands art as an elite activity is unconcerned with popular acceptances or resistances. The real stake is the utility of past cultural production for the present. These uses include the taking up of artistic strategies by culture industry and publicity business. The toehold of regard that contemporary art has in the culture is, after all, very slim, and it should be occupied solely by the best and the brightest. And those are, on the populist side, artists whose works indubitably influence the commercial world, the “consciousness industry,” which manages consensus (using of course innovative forms developed by resistant subcultures). Argued from the point of view of the elite, or vanguard, those artists must be advanced whose work can best refract philosophical and critical thought, ideas which are difficult to understand unless tied to objects of art which may be seen to exemplify or embody them.

I take the foregoing as the usually unspoken rationalization for the way it goes, the way it shakes out, so everyone can feel good about what they’re doing. Good cheer lies in acceptance, in an embrace of the inevitable, in somehow playing along with the cultural order.

It’s Darwinism.... just some kind of Gravity... or Capital’s marching orders.

But then again, who knows?

Losing tendencies may inspire significant subsequent art. In a history of cultural production, what may finally matter is not so much the facts of reception, or the competing tendencies in play at a moment of triumph (however that may be managed, either popularly or privately), but subsequent interpretations by other producers.

Things and practices may need to be lost, so they can be found again.

[ILL... Mike Kelley, college posters piece; R. Pettibone? Geo. Herriman’s Krazy Kat?]

Towards a “visible history”

If artists' organizations and alternative exhibiting institutions are the scaffolds of art, archives are the compost of historical construction. The organisms at work in them are time, mortality, and decay. This stink and rot is covered over in a conventional historical style of writing.... History should smell. Its construction should be self-evident. Students -- in both history and studio -- should be brought into the confidence of the archival so that history is more visible to them, clearer in the lineaments of its archival construction. Rather than simply the mastery of texts and their construction, immersion in the archive itself should be required in historical study.

To trouble the dominion of historical narrative, to set aside the authority of the text from within it, what is required? Perhaps it is through anecdote, dimly recalled, or colorfully enhanced by retellings, unverifiable, self-serving, drunken. Now I am romancing the oral history I did not do. Yet even there, as oral history is verified by being recorded, transcribed, and passed into the form of text, it loses the contingency of the scene. We don't see the rich surroundings of the hearty, or the stinking lair of the bitter.

Mortality of the record

Both art and information are mortal. Most is lost. Despite the diversity of our cultural life, our historical culture is in many ways impoverished. The hand of the market regularly determines archival value and settles questions of survival. The most desirable is agented into collections. Absent obvious commercial or historical value, -- (and the two seem increasingly to be conflated) -- the position of magnetic materials like video and computer information which require high maintenance is especially precarious.

[ILL -- Dziga Vertov, "Man with a Move Camera" still]

[question of the anarchival... cf. Derrida]

Destruction has always been the fate of most art, of course. This emerged anecdotally through a string on the College Art Association list initiated by Dario Gamboni as he prepared his book *Destruction of Art*. This is so for most records. The U.S. government has a "retention cycle" for each class of records. Minutes of panel meetings at the National Endowment for the Arts are destroyed within so many years, then supporting materials, and so forth. The mortality of the record is plotted and charted, just as prisoners are incarcerated for specific terms. Then the information that had once been a record is freed into living memory, the aether of mortality.

[ILL -- Baldessari, "Burned my Paintings" piece]

Digital media, the cyborg incarnation of the archive as prosthetic memory, promises a kind of solution for this mortality. How real is that promise? Is there "eternal life"?

Like my new career, this paper was begun on the ruins of another -- an inquiry into the question of obsolete technology in art initiated by Ardele Lister at a conference for video history in upstate New York.

The question of obsolete technology has been imbedded in the contemporary archive, and in the sudden sharp challenges that the rising storm of an information-based economy poses, the changes which are reshaping the global commercial landscape and academia.

I met Ardele, after an interval of many years, at a conference on the history of experimental video in Syracuse, New York, last year. Half the conference was given over to the preservation of magnetic media, an urgent question for video, since over time the content-bearing iron oxide tends to separate from its plastic backing. At the conference, Ralph Hocking, a founder of the Experimental TV Center, brought up the "why bother" question when he suggested that, since no exhibiting institution had ever really regularly supported this art anyhow, we should all agree to let it rot. This advice came from an artist who has methodically filled several garages on his farm with antiquated video devices, monitors, synthesizers, and computers -- a veritable warehouse of obsolete technology.

In her studio teaching at Rutgers University, Ardele Lister became concerned that her students, trained in digital video production, did not understand the conditions of production that generated so much of the canonical video work of the 1960s and '70s. Ardele's practical "studio" concern with the terms of production of historical media art is akin to the question of performance and of the political in the art of the recent past. All are contingent, unfolding within the terms of their time, that is, given certain transient material and historical conditions.

It's curious, and seems like a kind of fetishism of the tool, to think that the art is incomprehensible without knowing how it was made. This may be a formalist technological determinism, but this relation of the tool to the image is somewhat like that between a history and the archive which verifies it. Considered independent of its "proofs," any history is a work of fiction; it is the archive behind it which gives it authenticity.

An antiquarian of vanishing social forms: not failure, but obsolescence

As a former participant in the events I narrate as history, I execute a brand of nostalgia. "Ah," Betti-Sue Hertz said to me, "you're writing your memoirs." A nostalgic participant aspiring to write an empirical history can become an antiquarian. And in a sense I have been that, driven by the classic antiquarian motive of the urban dweller, scribbler and flaneur, who finds the city he or she knew vanished from sight. For me it is not architectural but social forms that have vanished. My impulse is all the more impossible, that is, to save not only the work of these artists' collectives, but the memory of their ambiances, their enveloping socius.

[Atget... street or shop window; Brassai, café scene...]

In preparing his collaborative installation "Open House" for the New Museum this year, Michael Smith asked to look at videotapes from my archive. The show Michael Smith and Josh White produced was a brilliant evocation of 20 years of a video artist's life through the fictive pretense that he was getting out of the art biz and selling his now-valuable loft in Soho.

“Open House” is the second installation this team has done which points to obsolete technologies and vanished cultural practices. Smith and White’s gallery construction of a bankrupt company called MUSCO which had produced light shows evoked an era of populist 1960s technology art. Both these installations, to which I can no more than allude, were rooted in the pathos of artistic and commercial failure. But both were really very funny. Smith appeared in videos playing his earnest clueless character Mike, as the principal in both shows.

The artists met at the Bottom Line, where Smith was the emcee for a series of weekly evenings of performance art and stand-up comedy. Josh White was writing for the TV show Seinfeld. So in a sense their art is a set for a series that’ll never get made, like a fringe art theater of postmodern cultural history.

Although the subject of both Smith and White’s works is artistic failure, Smith said that a key theme is survival, what artists have to do to get by, to stay on the scene. As the limelight of fame evades journeymen practitioners, first critical then historical neglect shades large areas of artistic practice. In the case of paintings and sculpture, many of these pass into decorative markets. Separated from their makers, stripped of their histories, these objects have a second life as retro curios, objets d’art inconnu. But what of practices – performative and political? Mostly their traces sit in archives, awaiting rearticulation, interpretation – awaiting historians.

I’d like to see historians of art write marginality and not just praise it in theory. There’s great romance here -- potentially productive failure, and expressive defeat relate to a sense of unavenged subjugation felt by many. (This is not exactly envy.)

But historians don’t do that. Artists do that, with work like the mystery history artworld theater produced by Smith and White. Artists become historians in response to the banal “docu-drama” of mass culture, but also because of the timidity of academic historians. In the early 1970s, conceptual artists were accused of usurping the critics’ role, as they published journals and generated reams of critical writing. Now artists may profitably commit similar trespasses on academic turf in order to discover their own past.

In-line text of a presentation by Alan Moore at the College Art Association